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WASHINGTON TIMES
26 July 1985

Contempt bred by hostility

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“Why Do They Hate Us?” is the eye-catching headline on the cover of the June issue of *Columbia*, the magazine of Columbia University.

And in this piece about the media — an edited version of remarks made by Robert MacNeil, executive director of public TV’s “MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour” at the dedication of the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia — Mr. MacNeil suggests that the answer to this question just might be (and these are my words, not his) that many of us have gained the hate of many of you the old-fashioned way: we earned it.

Noting that there is “an unquantifiable but, to all of us working in the media, evident spirit of rancor abroad in the land,” Mr. MacNeil points out that when the Reagan administration initially excluded the press from Grenada, the public applauded. For example, *Time* magazine reported that its letters ran 8-to-1 against the press and the opposition “was expressed in gleeful, even vengeful terms.”

But why? Why do they hate us, Mr. MacNeil asks? Well, he says, one reason involves the issue of fairness. He writes: “Fairness — even-

handedness, balance, objectivity — is the demand I hear more consistently from the public than anything else, and the greatest complaint I hear is the lack of it.” And, he says, the danger is that “unless our profession redefines fairness and its importance to us, others will increasingly try to define it for us — and perhaps succeed. . . .”

Mr. MacNeil observes: “I also see what the public may perceive as unfairness in the aggressive negativism, sometimes of a rather (Dan Rather? — J.L.) theatrical, posturing kind, that has pervaded much reporting, especially from Washington, since Vietnam and Watergate. It

is as though the media had not yet digested these events but still felt obliged to deal with ghosts.”

Right on! Are you listening Ben Bradlee?

As Mr. MacNeil sees it — and he sees this issue with amazing clarity

— in Washington some of the media representatives continue to act out a ritual hostility learned when they thought government was lying to them everyday about virtually everything. He says:

“It may be the influence of television exposure, which feeds on adversarial confrontation. Never ignore how the values fashionable in entertainment programs inform the journalistic end of the medium. All television gravitates toward drama, and what passes for drama is often belligerence, people barking at each other, like soap opera actors, sounding vehement to make up for cardboard characters or too little rehearsal time.”

Amen!

“Perhaps,” says Mr. MacNeil, “reporters feel that the climate of the time requires them to sound hostile so that they will appear to be tough.” (Are you listening, Sam Donaldson?). And he adds: “But what if that merely feeds a perception that shows up in the surveys: that the press is simply being rude, that it is being, in the words of a Citizens Choice study, ‘too hard’ on government — in this case, the president? What if the effect is to substitute in the public mind, and perhaps the press’s own mind, this rather theatrical toughness for the real thing?”

Worried, correctly I think, that this phony-macho bit (which Mr. Donaldson has admitted that, in his case, he calls “The Act”) may reinforce the public perception of unfairness without any corresponding trenchancy to back it up, Mr. MacNeil declares:

“But another effect of the news media’s pseudo-toughness could be to strengthen the hand of government — any administration — in manipulating the media to make the public think that we are unfair to the government.”

In conclusion, Mr. MacNeil points out that by its own admission CBS did not treat Gen. William Westmoreland by its own standards of fairness. He says of the network’s internal investigation of its program about Gen. Westmoreland, an investigation conducted by Burton Benjamin:

“Benjamin said the issue of whether Gen. Westmoreland cooked the books on enemy troop strength in Vietnam for political reasons was ‘obviously and historically controversial,’ and that there was an imbalance in presenting the two sides.

Gen. Westmoreland and his one defender got a total of five minutes and 39 seconds. Sam Adams, the former CIA official who was his chief accuser, and his eight supporting witnesses, got 19 minutes and 19 seconds. Sympathetic witnesses were coddled, one was interviewed twice to improve his testimony, and there were other violations of CBS News standards.

Benjamin also pointed out that the documentary had not included portions of an interview in which President Johnson said that he was fully aware of the size of the enemy force that confronted the United States in the Tet Offensive. . . . The network said it would have been better if the word ‘conspiracy’ had not been used, if more people who disagreed with the premise had been interviewed, and if there had been strict compliance

with CBS News standards. Those are pretty big ifs.”

Indeed, CBS did, however, acknowledge and release in full this so-called Benjamin Report.

Mr. MacNeil fears that journalistic carelessness that ignores basic fairness — a decent respect for the opinions of mankind — will invite attacks on the liberty the press has enjoyed and will turn the general spirit of the people more hostile. He says that until now, American journalists have “ignored or laughed off” concerns about fairness (are you sure you are listening, Mr. Bradlee?), confident that the right-thinking majority would protect them, and that when their enemies had them surrounded, the First Amendment cavalry would gallop up just in time. “Perhaps it always will. And perhaps not,” he says.

Words, all of which, to the wise, should be sufficient.